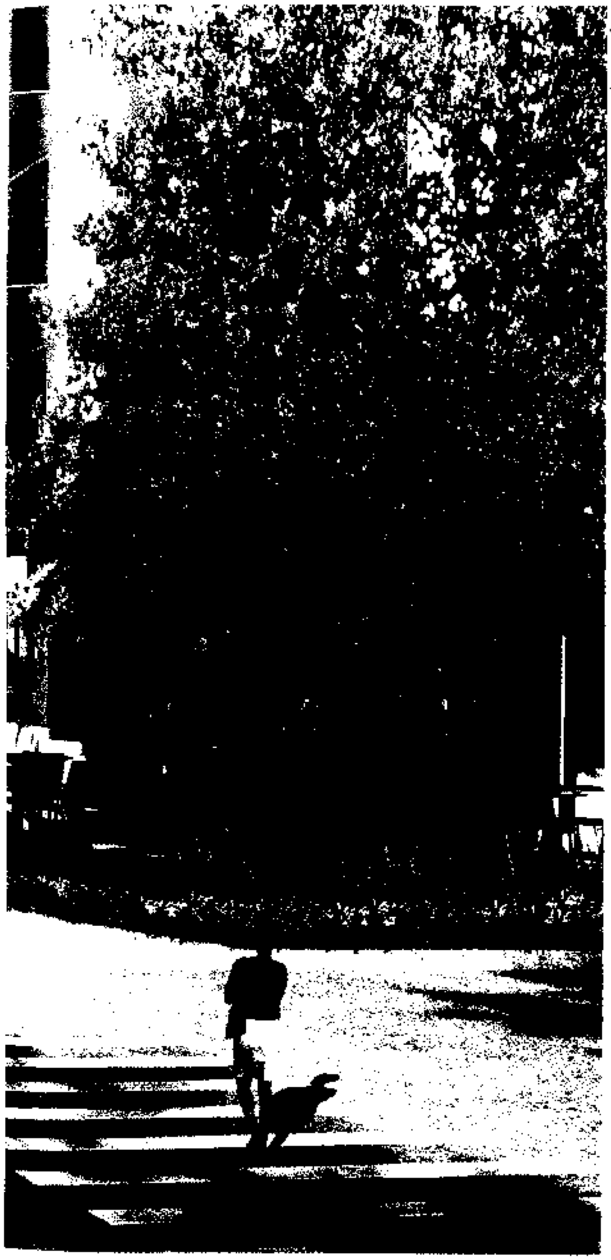
Fixing the Strip

Strategies for renewing **Manchester** Road **in suburban St. Louis: Improve access, add walkable town centers, and work with local businesses.**

A short course in bringing life to declining retail corridors.

In what seem to be the dying days of the Great Recession, developers, lenders, and civic leaders have begun to realize that the U.S. is "over-stored" and will not support the current square footage of retail, even with a return to normal market conditions. Meanwhile, competing jurisdictions continue to lure existing businesses to newer and fancier shopping centers and big box malls. As a result, many cities that have relied heavily on the sales tax now must deal with diminished budgets and correspondingly diminished services.

So what do the older suburban corridors



Nathan Cox Photography

By Kurt Culbertson

do, faced with increased vacancies and storefronts filled with non-sales-tax producing businesses like check cashing and nail salon services?

Integrating planning and urban design is part of the answer. Most declining retail corridors reflect the uncoordinated

Win Win Parking Strategies

Tough times require tough solutions—particularly for cities faced with ever-shrinking revenues. And parking is a good place to start the budget-balancing process. Here are six potential strategies. All of them are potentially tough sells—to department directors, local boards, elected officials, and other stakeholders—but the results can be worth the hassle.

Charge for permits. Residential permit programs have traditionally been subsidized with public funds. Let's say it costs the city $10,000 a year to manage a program that serves 1,000 users. That figure covers the costs of issuing permits, maintaining signage, and enforcing the rules. Now think of what the city could take in if it charged $10 annually for each permit. Voila! No more public subsidy. Arlington, Virginia, has a very user-friendly RPP. San Francisco's version, which includes 14 different permit categories, is more comprehensive.

Raise public rates. Public parking facilities are often priced below market rates. That amounts to a public subsidy. In Tampa, where I live, the cheapest place to park downtown is the city-owned garage. That doesn't have to be the case.

Pay for convenience. Municipalities should also consider charging premium rates for premium parking locations (whether on- or off-street). Users are generally willing to pay for convenience, as the success of express delivery services like UPS makes clear. But it is important to price the convenience factor appropriately. Too many municipalities provide free or cheap on-street parking and then wonder why no one parks in the empty (not free) parking garage located a block away. In a decade of conducting parking studies, I have encountered many municipalities that undercharged for on-street parking.

In addition to increasing parking revenues, charging for convenience also encourages the use of mass transit and creates high turnover in busy areas. It also ensures more pedestrian activity, which in turn enhances safety. More pedestrians coupled with a good mix of retail, restaurant, and entertainment uses can mean an economically healthier community—with more jobs and higher sales tax and property tax revenue.

Adjust for inflation. When was the last time your community reevaluated the fines it charges for parking violations? In some locations, fines have remained constant for the past decade, while enforcement costs (including cashier salaries, equipment maintenance, and security outlays) have risen steadily. From 2000 through the end of 2009, the average annual inflation rate was 2.6 percent. This means that a fine of $20 in 2000 should now be about $25.

Nathan Cox Photography

Relate parking to smart growth. Most communities do not want to discourage growth, but some development tactics are smarter and more sustainable than others. Establishing reasonable parking policies is a way to ensure economic health. Shared parking is one such policy. It has been incorporated into zoning ordinances in communities such as Portland, Oregon; Palm Beach, Florida; and Waltham, Massachusetts. Other municipalities have set up funds to allow businesses to make payments instead of providing a certain number of parking spaces. This mechanism works well with shared parking, as one parking space can accommodate multiple uses, thus preserving valuable land for other developments.

Ramp up technology. Technological advances have made it easier and faster to lower parking expenses and increase revenues. The newest parking meters and payment systems significantly reduce payroll costs for cashiers, accountants, and lot attendants. Automated enforcement tools such as license plate recognition cameras can be used to enforce time limits and to flag vehicles with outstanding tickets. They can also be equipped to generate and mail citations directly to motorists. Fines associated with wheel locks and boots—which save towing fees—can now be paid by phone by violators. Lastly, online payment services and municipal websites can process credit card or debit card transactions immediately, thereby reducing cash handling, mailing expenses, and administrative time. As an added feature, these sites can disseminate parking-related information on a wider scale.

Change we can count on. It may be difficult to convince local stakeholders of the value of these strategies. But keep in mind that many of the individuals who dictate how a parking department will operate are the same people who figure out how to balance their budgets. That makes this a good time to make positive change, reduce public subsidies, and rebalance the parking operational budget.

Can your public parking operation afford to let these opportunities slip by?

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planning of the postwar era, when accommodating traffic was the number one goal. In an effort to speed up commuter traffic along commercial corridors, local transportation authorities often limited the number of traffic signals—thus hampering access to local businesses. In general, commercial corridors in the U.S. are overwhelmingly automobile-dependent. Walking from store to store is highly impractical and, at times, dangerous. The problem is worse for retail corridors that are designated as state highways since the desire to move traffic on a regional level often outweighs the desire to create walkable environments.

Transit in the form of buses or rail could be an answer, but low-density retail corridors do not easily accommodate new transit lines and facilities. The lack of transit, in turn, makes it hard to attract workers from other areas.

There have been plenty of corridor studies over the last few decades addressing these and other challenges. But most of these studies have focused on engineering solutions such as lane improvements and signalization designed to streamline the traffic flow. Others have focused solely on landscaping and beautification. The results are predictable: superficial improvement but not true revitalization.

A different approach

We propose a broader approach, based on the "great streets" and "complete streets" programs that are popping up around the country. These programs go beyond traffic to incorporate the needs of pedestrians, bicyclists, and mass transit. They also consider environmental issues such as stormwater management, noise, and urban forestry, and aesthetic issues such as lighting, public art, and signage. The most successful efforts examine the relationship between transportation corridors and surrounding land uses.

An example is the Great Streets Initiative being carried out by the East-West Gateway Council of Governments in the St. Louis area. In 2009, the council launched the second phase of planning and design for four demonstration projects, one in Labadie and three in St. Louis. Our firm worked with the council on two of the St. Louis projects, one urban (South Grand Boulevard) and one suburban (Manchester Road). These are some of the ideas the consultant team came up with, which we think will be applicable to other places as well.

Design Workshop

City corridor: The plan for South Grand Boulevard calls for removing one traffic lane, making room for outdoor dining.

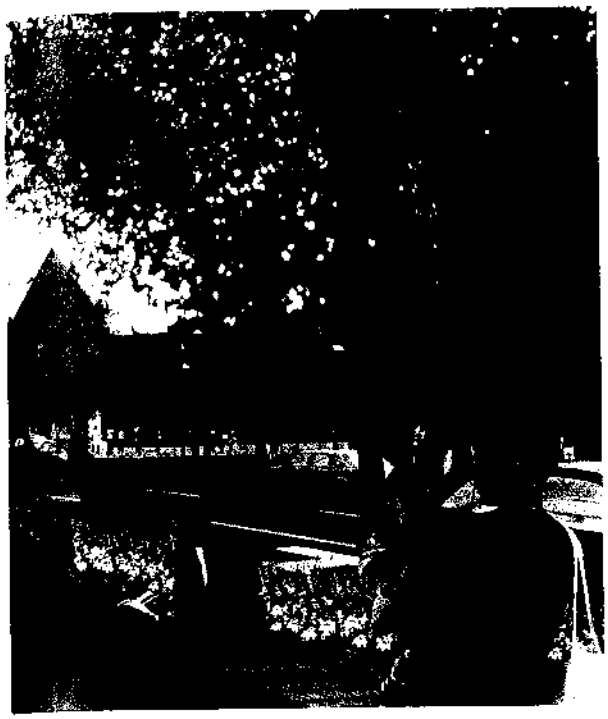
For city streets

Look beyond the right-of-way. Our surveys of community groups indicated support for higher density uses and taller buildings than are typical along urban arterial corridors. One example is the six-block stretch of South Grand Boulevard that we studied. The wide street (four travel lanes and two parking lanes) offers a wide range of ethnic restaurants but still has many vacant storefronts.

Residents made it clear in an online survey and in open houses that featured "keypad polling" that they wanted to reduce vehicular traffic speed and to minimize access into adjacent residential areas. Thus, the final design for the street includes wider sidewalks and an improved wayfinding program to define entries into adjacent neighborhoods and direct visitors to designated parking locations.

The plan for South Grand anticipates infilling empty parking lots with new developments that will include ground-level retail. The final design also reduces the number of travel lanes from four to three, providing 20 percent more sidewalk space for outdoor dining. It will call for bulb-outs at intersections to calm traffic and make crossing the street easier.

Solve stormwater problems. Using porous pavement for sidewalks and parking lots along South Grand will help to resolve stormwater issues in the area, thereby reducing the load on the city's already burdened combined sewer system. The final



design also calls for adding plantings, including rain gardens, and replacing existing street trees with species designed for urban conditions. The result should lower heat levels by up to 10 degrees.

Look for ways to help local businesses. By providing an environment that is safer for pedestrians and motorists, that is quieter and cooler, and that enhances the overall aesthetics of the streetscape, the design for South Grand has given a boost to the local Community Improvement District. Over time, the community will be able to assess the economic impact of the South Grand improvements by monitoring baseline metrics for sales revenue and sales tax volume provided by the consultants.

For suburban corridors

Consider access management. The consultant team determined that poor access greatly contributed to the declining economic performance of Manchester Road, a post-World War II retail corridor that runs through five communities in west St. Louis County. This Great Streets project focuses on a 5.5-mile stretch of the road, which was originally established as Route 66. Community surveys reveal that motorists find the proliferation of curb cuts confusing. The consultants responded with access management strategies that include installing center medians to allow safer left turns, interconnecting parking lots, and creating "back streets" running parallel to the main thoroughfare.

Understand the market. The market study we completed at the outset of the project suggested that Manchester Road is overretailed and that any growth would result from adding residential and office uses, not more shopping. In addition, a fiscal impact analysis examined the costs and benefits that would result from redevelopment in each of the five municipalities along the corridor.

Add walkable town centers. The same market study suggested that new town centers could add to the appeal of Manchester Road, invigorating businesses in the communities along the corridor. The town center idea was supported by business owners, civic leaders, and elected officials who took part in the "chip game," a participatory exercise devised to help citizens consider future land uses along the corridor. The game participants also envisioned that the new town centers would eventually be served by a bus rapid transit line.

Get buy-in from local businesses. There are about 700 businesses along the Manchester Road corridor, many of them mom-and-pop operations. A number of these business owners are understandably concerned about the effects of proposed access management strategies, particularly the removal of curb cuts and installation of a center median that would block some left turns. To allay their fears, we led a series of informal discussions and mini-charrettes, which informed final recommendations for the corridor. The plan that resulted calls for gradually implementing redevelopment, access management, and roadway improvements.

Initial improvements will include adding traffic signals, linking parking lots, and creating more useful wayfinding signs. Future plans call for consolidating curb cuts and installing a center median with left turn lanes. Meanwhile, new lighting, pedestrian infrastructure, and new landscape standards will improve the appearance and function of the corridor.

Align ordinances with design strategies. Rezoning parts of the corridor for mixed use will encourage denser development and provide property owners with potential land-use alternatives besides retail. Tailored parking ordinances will be aimed at encouraging future transit use.

Get your numbers straight. In any project, it is essential to supply accurate baseline metrics that allow communities to measure the success of a plan over time. Key metrics for Manchester Road include the balance of jobs to housing; public-sector return on investment; sales tax revenue generated per square foot along the corridor; bond ratings for the five local communities; and local retail, multifamily, and office vacancy rates. The team also performed an intensive field study (a "BioBlitz") to establish baseline conditions and metrics for urban wildlife.

Don't forget implementation. The communities along Manchester Road are developing a comprehensive financing and organizational strategy to ensure that the redevelopment of the corridor progresses over time and outlasts electoral changes in local governing bodies. In order to fund initial infrastructure investments and other expenses, it may be necessary to establish capital improvement districts, transportation development districts, or tax increment financing districts. The communities along Manchester Road are creating merchants' associations and considering adding a master development authority to coordinate redevelopment and ensure that the design of the corridor is consistent.

The main lesson we hope you'll take away from our description of these corridors is the need for a comprehensive approach to planning and design. In working on any corridor, urban or suburban, look beyond the right-of-way and consider economic, environmental, community, and aesthetic issues. Make sure your clients have a good understanding of baseline conditions, targeted outcomes, and measurable results. The effort is worth it. The ubiquitous commercial strip really is the economic lifeblood of communities across the country. Revitalizing these corridors takes lots of cooperation—from the elected officials, civic leaders, and local residents—and lots of planning talent.

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OTHER GREAT STREETS

APA's Great Places in America Program annually recognizes 10 notable streets. For details about nominations, go to www.planning.org/greatplaces.